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ABSTRACT

Educators and researchers have long equated the term "educated" with number of grades of formal schooling completed, relegating to the ranks of the "undereducated" those persons without higher education, and especially those without at least 12 years of schooling. Recent research by Alan Tough, however, and case studies in rural Vermont, challenge these cherished notions. Tough and the researchers in Vermont found that most adults they interviewed were involved in self-directed learning, usually averaging about 100 hours per year. Amount of formal education did not seem to influence amount of this self-directed learning. These rural residents seemed to have well-developed methods of learning and to have been engaged profitably in lifelong learning, albeit without formal institutional structures. This research suggests that educators should pay more attention to the lifelong learning experiences of adults and stop defining as "undereducated" persons who have acquired their educations outside formal learning structures. (KC)

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WHO ARE THE UNDEREDUCATED?

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WHO ARE THE UNDEREDUCATED?

> A fresh hope is astir. From many quarters comes the call for a new kind of education with its initial assumption affirming that education is life--not a mere preparation for an unknown kind of future living.
>
> Eduard Lindeman, '26

Though these words were echoed over 50 years ago by an early father of adult education, Eduard Lindeman, we are only beginning to understand how prophetic they are for us today. Since Lindeman's time, enormous changes have occurred in all sectors of society. A quick glance at the landscape of change reveals startling advances in such areas as technology, health, and education to name just a few. And of course, more are in the offing.

But how far have we really come in advancing Lindeman's notion of education equating life? How seriously have educators and policy makers dealt with this concept? How seriously have people like you and me addressed this notion? Can we see evidence of this concept in action today?

In Vermont, over a period of two years, basic research was carried out with a population of rural adults having less than 12 years of education to investigate the phenomenon of learning which emerges from life experiences. Known as the NIE Adult Learning Project, the study focused on the self-directed learning activities of rural adults, especially as they occurred in non-formal settings.

The study was organized in three major phases. The first phase consisted of a survey interview of 93 adults living in a rural county of Vermont. Utilizing an interview format developed by Allen Tough of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, this phase provided an overview of the learning activity that was currently underway in these communities. A ran-

dom sample of adults was selected using household survey maps, transportation maps, town clerks and other local officials. A seperate sample of adults enrolled in Adult Basic Education were also interviewed.

The second phase of the project involved in-depth case studies with a subsample of 14 subjects from the first phase. Subjects were selected for representativeness in age, sex, educational background and small town residency. Through extensive interviews and observations, three interviewers spent upwards of 15 hours each with case study subjects, asking them a series of questions in conversational mode and documenting contextual and nonverbal datum. The series of questions was structured around past, present, and future reflections about themselves as learners and how these affect their learning process.

A third phase involved a comprehensive analysis of the data and dissemination of results. Data were examined utilizing several perspectives from related disciplines such as cognitive theory, developmental theory and consciousness theory. A series of meetings involving education researchers interested in adult learning were sponsored to analyze the findings in light of their conceptual frameworks.

To give you a taste of what some of the respondents related, listen for a moment to some of their voices:

> The one thing I can't even make a distinction of is when you are learning and when you are teaching. I can't see how to do this. The fascinating thing for me is I've never found a day when I haven't learned something and I don't expect that there will be a day when I won't continue to learn something new. I suppose there are a good many people who have done the same thing and they're not aware of it.
>
> (52 year-old retired postal clerk with 12 years of education)

Or another voice:

> If there's something I really want to know, I look it

> up. I'd go ask advice from somebody . . . there's always some people that know. To desire to learn something new or be interested in some new project or wanting to know more about what you are doing . . . is something that you always have.
>
> (62 year-old former nurse with 8 years of education)

Or one last voice reflecting on his tendencies to learn:

> Usually I go right at a problem and this helps me to learn. Learning by doing I guess you'd call it. Still, if I don't have the answer, I'll ask others who know. There's no sense in making silly mistakes, especially if there's someone who has the answer. My rule of thumb is don't try to figure out for yourself what others have already figured out for you.
>
> (63 year-old retired farmer with 8 years of formal education)

These voices, as well as those of the other respondents interviewed during the study, gave us call to question a number of assumptions about the meaning of education and the educated individual. As the study unfolded, a glaring paradox became more and more apparent. This paradox concerned the language used to describe the rural adult population investigated: i.e., undereducated, little educated, minimally educated, etc. All of these terms are terribly pejorative and when measured against the findings of the study, cast serious questions about who really is educated and undereducated.

The term educated in recent years has been largely defined by the number of years of schooling an individual completed. The logic followed that the more years one completed, the more educated he or she was. Inherent in this definition, however, is the almost total neglect for the wealth of knowledge acquired through daily life in such settings as the home, work and community.

Research by Tough and others has helped to extend traditional notions of where learning takes place to settings beyond the formal classroom.

The basic picture, according to Tough (1978), is remarkably consistent from one population to another. The findings suggest that upwards of 90 percent of the adult population are engaged in at least one intentional learning project per year, lasting 100 hours on the average. And, most of this learning occurs outside of school settings with the majority planned by the learner himself.

The results from the first phase of the NIE Adult Learning Project (Tough Replication) confirmed what Tough and other researchers utilizing his methodology have found: nearly everyone interviewed reported at least one major learning project. The average amount of time spent on each learning project (106 hours) was again parallel to Tough's findings, with most reported as self-planned. Although subtle variations were evident in the types of learning projects conducted (i.e., craft oriented, home/farm related, job/career directed) no significant differences appeared in the number of learning projects reported by subjects having more or less than 12 years of education. This glaring finding suggested to the researchers that years of education is a poor predictor of learning activity, particularly when conducted by the learner himself. It too confirmed a growing uneasiness among the researchers that past assumptions about the educated individual were invalid if measured solely by credentials or years of education completed. No, the researchers speculated, additional factors such as life experience must be considered as part of the total picture.

Perhaps a useful way of visualizing what became clearer to the researchers as the study unfolded, is the proverbial tip of the iceberg analogy. Imagine, if you will, that the entire range of education is represented by the iceberg. For years, educators, politicians and community members alike paid attention to the highly visible tip of the iceberg.

Attention was focused primarily on formal schools or institutions of learning and the educated individual was measured in terms of how many years of schooling he or she acquired. At the same time, however, it turns out that only a small percentage of the total picture of what it means to be educated is represented by the visible portion of the iceberg. Below the surface, is a massive superstructure of settings where individuals acquire knowledge and grow as human beings. All of a sudden, rather than a narrow conception of the educated individual, an expanded view emerges. The knowledge gained throughout life (at home, work, church, community) is included and celebrated as the measure of what it means to be educated. Under this conception, the educated individual becomes a composite of his or her total life experience. All of a sudden, in the words of Polanyi (1959), "The ideal of a knowledge embodied in strictly impersonal statements now appears self-contradictory, meaningless, a fit subject to ridicule. We must learn to accept a knowledge that is manifestly personal."

While the Tough replication served notice of the need for a broader conception of the educated individual, the second phase of the study sharpened the dimensions of this reality in wholly personal terms. Clearly, from the case studies, the researchers saw human beings at work seeking answers to their purpose and lot in life. Some appeared more content than others, but there was a quality of reverence for new knowledge that may help solve an immediate or future problem. For example, for Mr. Ambrose it was modifying a garage into a chicken coup and pig pen because of time and financial constraints. For Mrs. Lacroix, it was fashioning a room divider from discarded table leg sections from a furniture factory where she once worked because she liked to invent things from scratch. For Mr Rock, it was converting a Franklin stove from an inefficient heater into

one capable of heating the entire house because of escalating energy costs.

The cases portrayed full human beings, not empty or second-rate individuals as some policy makers would have us believe. There was evidence of teaching and learning. There was a degree of understanding about the environment and personal selves. Growth was apparent. The researchers saw systematic problem solving and a resourcefulness usually attributed to only the educated. Indeed, the researchers saw educated individuals in the largest sense of the term, not indigent human beings as popular myth would have it.

Again, pause with me a moment to "hear" some of the stories of these people, remembering that many possess less than 12 years of education:

> In reflecting over how he tends to think, Mr. Bolduc described a systematic, step-by-step process. He talked of beginning with a vision or an image in his mind. This image might be triggered while traveling or lying in bed. As the image takes form, Mr. Bolduc often commits it to paper but sometimes, keeps it to himself. 'I sometimes store things away for awhile' he said, 'before doing anything with 'em.' Then later on, as a need develops, Mr. Bolduc recalls the idea and begins active work on it. He talked of consulting with local friends or experts for their ideas. Sometimes he looks at existing models for comparison purposes. Other times, he consults a magazine or article. 'I usually have to see it (though), before I can do anything.'
>
> (49 year-old Franco-American suffering from a hereditary kidney disorder with 5 years of education)

Or another slice from one of the cases:

> When asked how she goes about learning, Mrs. Moss is quite matter-of-fact. She notes, 'If there's something I really want to know, I look it up. I'd go ask advice from somebody . . . there's always some people that know.' For her, 'The desire to learn something new or be interested in some new project or wanting to know more about what you're doing . . . is something that you always have.' Mrs. Moss feels that her way of learning has been shaped by something intrinsic. She believes that 'It's something that makes you want to learn to do things. I think curiosity has alot to do with it, too.' To Mrs. Moss, learning is lifelong, speaking up rather than slowing down as she gets older and has more time.
>
> (62 year-old former nurse with 8 years of education)

Or another cameo from one of the cases:

> Looking broadly at the kind of learner Mr. Rock appears to be, one could represent him as a visual thinker who approaches problems in a logical step-by-step way. As he described, 'I usually begin with an image in my mind, and then begin to let it take shape through the many books and articles I read and study. As I continue to look for answers, the image becomes real, whether on paper or in my head.' Mr Rock is also aware that he tends to do a lot of thinking subconsciously. He likened his thought process to that of a computer.
>
> > Often, I find that I have learned something in the interim that I didn't even realize I was learning. It's a subconscious type of learning, but this may go with your mind working. I suppose it's like a computer--today's computer. You know, they keep putting information into them and you press the right button sometime in the future and things come back that way--well it's an accumulation of what they put in.
>
> (52 year-old retired postal clerk with 12 years of eduation)

What the case studies did for the researchers in raising serious questions about who are the uneducated, they apparently did for the consultants to the project as well. For as one consultant related:

> I stand in awe of the courage of these people: courage before learning . . . as being is before comprehension; that is prior in both time and meaning . . . Do not the cases invite a respite from the do-goodisms of the education strategy? Are not the cases shadows cast by living creatures who have survived this century with an integrity, a wholeness most of us 'researchers' are in want of? Their counterparts live in the urban ghettos, also survivors. They live in the culture of any poverty, Western or Eastern; and they have learned to learn as they have learned to breathe; outside of, in spite of, rarely (though fortuitously, occasionally) because of the education strategy and institution.
> (Warren Ziegler, 1982)

This sobering commentary is sad when we realize that such realities exist, almost without notice, in this country of abundance and opportunity. I'm personally moved to a point of shame; to a point of intolerance for an educational system out of touch with the realities

of life and experience.

But what can we as educators and policy makers learn from these quiet people and their rich lives? Do we callously push aside their stories, questioning the efficacy and accuracy of their knowledge and wisdom? Or, do we acknowledge as Dewey, Lindeman and Whitehead have, that education is life and life is education? I challenge each of you to look beyond traditional educational structures for evidence of the educated individual. The evidence is there, tied up in the lives of us all. whether rich or poor, young or old, rural or urban dwellers. It has been there for centuries and will likely be there for centuries to come. Perhaps it is because we have grown so dependent on specialized knowledge that we have lost perspective that the educated individual is more than someone with a Ph.D. I hope we regain our perspective before it's too late.

By way of closing, I'd like to share with you something uniquely personal that occurred to me recently. On this Monday past (March 15, 1982), I became the proud father of a 6 month-old baby boy. My wife and I were informed of the decision to place the child with us but two days before. As we madly scurried about making preparations for our new arrival, I paused for a moment, realizing how unprepared I was for dealing with an infant. Though my wife and I had been planning to adopt for sometime, the news came suddenly and without warning. In effect, I felt totally undereducated in child rearing practises, although I am one of those fortunate individuals who possess two advanced degrees. What this experience did for me, is help sharpen the very paradox we have been exploring today. To some extent, each of us is undereducated in our own way. For

some, it is uniquely personal, for others skill or knowledge related. The challenge before us is to recognize our deficiencies, and in our own humble ways, continue to grow as educated individuals.

I leave you, as I started, with a quote from Eduard Lindeman:

> . . . the resource of highest value in . . . education is the learner's experience. If education is life, then life is also education. Too much learning consists of vicarious substitution of someone else's experience and knowledge. Psychology is teaching us, however, that we learn what we do, and that therefore all genuine education will keep doing and thinking together. Life becomes rational, meaningful, as we learn to be intelligent about the things we do and the things that happen to us. If we lived sensibly, we should all discover that the attractions of experiences increase as we grow older. Correspondingly, we should find cumulative joys in searching out the reasonable meaning of the events in which we play parts. In teaching children it may be necessary to anticipate objective experience by uses of imagination, but adult experience is already there waiting to be appropriated. Experience is the adult learner's living textbook.

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